# Indigo Prophecy: An Analysis

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Ernest Adams claims “Interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative; narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power.”[1] While many game scholars, myself included, would disagree strongly with his claim, Adams illuminates an issue that pervades video and computer gaming. Even today when many games are lauded for complex, emotional stories, the narrative is frequently divorced from the actual interactions carried out by the player. The player completes a set a challenges, and then a narrative segment leads into the next challenge. The player is either “playing” or is being exposed to the narrative, but rarely do these occur simultaneously. Yet a variety of designers are trying to reverse this trend. Janet Murray suggests that we “think of the characteristics of stories and games and how these separable characteristics are being recombined and reinvented.”[2]

*Indigo Prophecy*, developed by Quantic Dream and released in September 2005, attempted to unify the narrative with the player’s interactions. David Cage, the designer and director, has been open in stating his goal for *Indigo Prophecy:* to transcend the established conventions of video games to create a more cinematic experience. Some of *Indigo Prophecy*’s innovations were successful, while others reveal that significant refinement is required. Looking at *Indigo Prophecy* is particularly relevant given the industry’s renewed emphasis on narrative. Two of the most critically lauded and bestselling games of 2007, *Bioshock* and *Portal*, featured innovative and immersive

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[1] Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game.”

[2] Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game.”

narratives. In addition, Quantic Dream is set to release *Heavy Rain: The Origami Killer* in 2009, which the developer claims will fix *Indigo Prophecy*'s many shortcomings.

Before delving into the game, a vocabulary and body of information must be established. First, "video games" will be used to refer to both computer games and console (Playstation, Xbox, Game Boy, etc) games. The "player" is the human interacting with the game. An "avatar" is the character within the game the player controls. The avatar will sometimes be distinguished from the "character," who exists in the game world separate from the player. "Game mechanics" are the rules and interactions that govern the game**.** When discussing games, it is helpful to distinguish "story" from "narrative." The "story" is a fixed sequence of events (the plot), while the "narrative" is the manner in which the story is presented. The "camera" in a game is not literal, but instead refers to the point of view that is displayed on the screen. The camera will be either 1st-person (displaying what the avatar sees) or 3rd-person (separate from the avatar).

References in this paper to *Indigo Prophecy* will specifically refer to the Playstation 2 release. The following image (figure 1) shows the Playstation 2 controller. The primary controls for Indigo Prophecy are the two thumb-sticks (right and left) seen on the front of the controller, the colored face buttons (Square, Triangle, Circle, X), as well as the four triggers on top of the controller, two per side, called R1 (Right 1), L1 (Left 1), R2 and L2.


fig.1 - Playstation 2 Controller

Immediately upon starting a new game, prior to an introductory sequence, there is a tutorial/introduction featuring David Cage himself. A representation of Cage teaches the controls to the player. But the tutorial does not take place within the game's fictional world. The player controls a crash-test dummy while on a soundstage filled with various props and a chroma key blue screen. When the tutorial is in the game world using a character avatar, the consistency of the fiction is broken. Even without reading the manual or any prior knowledge of the game, the player is told in this sequence that *Indigo Prophecy* is not just a typical game, but an interactive cinematic experience. There is no further tutorial once the player enters the game-world and takes control of a character. The player is thus thrust immediately into a logically consistent world without a clear progression of "easy" to "difficult" challenges that teach him or her the mechanics of the game.

Its mechanics differentiate *Indigo Prophecy* from most other games, particularly with regard to how the mechanics blend with the narrative. Cage writes:

> "One of the key points in *Indigo Prophecy* was the idea of getting interactivity and narration to work together. Most games oppose these two concepts or rather, they develop them in turn: a cut scene to advance the narration, then an action scene, then another cut scene for the narration. The structure of this narrative process is very close to that of porn movies."[3]

Erik Wolpaw, lead writer of *Portal*, described this balancing act as games telling two stories at once. "There's the 'story story' which is the cutscenes and the dialogue, and the 'gameplay story' which is the story that's described by the actions you take in the game world."[4] Wolpaw refers to the separation between the two stories as the "delta" (change). A small Wolpaw delta[5] would imply that the game mechanics and narrative are closely intertwined. Ideally, at least according to Wolpaw and Cage, the two stories wouldn't be distinguishable; the narrative would exist directly through the gameplay and wouldn't require separate sequences. *Portal*, a three-hour game built around a single mechanic, received numerous "Game of the Year" awards in 2007. This was primarily due to *Portal's* impeccably written dialogue and minimal Wolpaw delta. *Indigo Prophecy* was only marginally as successful as *Portal*, yet the intended scope of *Indigo Prophecy* was much greater. As a result, *Indigo Prophecy* features a variety of significant innovations that reduce the Wolpaw delta but it also frequently falls short in execution.

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[3] David Cage, "Postmortem: Indigo Prophecy"

[4] Brandon Sheffield, "Still Alive: Kim Swift and Erik Wolpaw Talk Portal."

[5] "Wolpaw delta" now been coined.

In general, games tie specific actions to specific buttons. For instance in most two-dimensional Mario games, the “A” button triggers jumps and the “B” button shoots fireballs. This severely limits possible actions. Credit is often given to *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) for popularizing “context-sensitive” actions. Depending on what object the avatar faced, the “A” button performed different functions. *Indigo Prophecy* makes every action “contextual.” The closest that the game comes to a discrete action button is X, which when held causes the avatar to run rather than walk. Instead, whenever the avatar is in a position to interact with an object or person, a set of possible actions appears at the top of the screen. The system used for selecting actions was dubbed MPAR (Motion Physical Action Reaction). All actions are selected by a corresponding movement of the right thumb-stick, as in figure 2. A motion to the right picks up the glass of water. A motion upwards makes the avatar stand up. The result is that the avatar interacts with the world in context-appropriate ways. The designer can also mold scenes more precisely than is possible in other games. He or she can specify interactions that progress the narrative in varied ways rather than having to make the possible interactions match a small set of button-mapped commands.


fig.2 - Lucas Kane in the diner

The gestural nature of MPAR effects how the player's immersion. A study out of the University College of London measured the movement of players using motion-sensitive controls. The conclusion was that "by inducing body movement, the device resulted in a higher sense of engagement in the players and mediated a feeling of presence in the digital world."[6] While *Indigo Prophecy* does not require body movement, gestural controls on the thumb-stick are closer to performing a physical action than merely pressing a button. The result is increased engagement with the events occurring onscreen.

[6] Nadia Bianchi-Berthouze et al., "Does Body Movement Engage You More in Digital Game Play? and Why?"

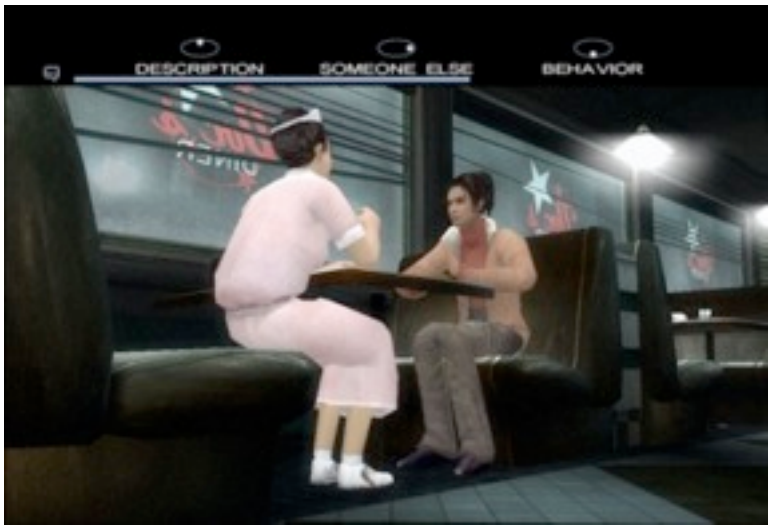


fig.3 - Detective Carla Valenti asks the waitress for details about the murder.

Conversations are similarly controlled with MPAR. A set of prompts appear at the top accompanied by text rather than images. The text is usually just a word or short phrase representing the topic of conversation to pursue or the attitude of the character. A timer below the options forces the player to quickly choose an option before the scene continues without input. This simulates how an individual must think quickly during conversations. Scenes where the characters are in a hurry have shorter time limits. The player gets to experience the conversation as it naturally flows, rather than having infinite time to carefully choose an action. In addition, constantly progressing time ensures that the conversation continues to flow naturally with the pre-recorded voices (all dialogue is spoken, though subtitles can be activated). *Mass Effect* (2007) received significant praise for its dialogue mechanic that owed a great deal to *Indigo Prophecy*. The player selects from up to four short questions or statements that, like in *Indigo Prophecy*, do not represent verbalized dialogue but instead determine the direction of the dialogue. While *Mass Effect* does not have a visible timer, dialogue automatically

continues with the current selection (one is selected by default). The combined effect is closer to the smoothly progressing dialogue that *Indigo Prophecy* intended, but requires more reading by the player to decide on an option.


fig.4 - Shepherd asks “What do you want?” in *Mass Effect*.

In certain situations, the prompts in *Indigo Prophecy* control not just the avatar, but other characters. For instance, in a scene when Lucas (the avatar at the time) is being questioned by his brother Markus, the conversational options actually determine what Markus, not Lucas, will say next. This is an awkward, though interesting, situation. The player is left feeling like a director instead of a character. This is like the difference between “interactive fiction” and “hypertext fiction.” Interactive fiction, where the player types in commands to be carried out, usually ties the player to an avatar in the story. If the character is killed, the game ends. Hypertext fiction, on the other hand, doesn’t ask for specific actions but instead lets the reader/player choose the next path for the story. *Indigo Prophecy* similarly blurs the role of avatar and director at times as in the aforementioned conversation. Some people might find this jarring, but others might see it as providing intriguing complexity. This detachment from the avatar is strengthened by

the multiple avatar-characters each with different perspectives, which will be addressed below.

Action sequences similarly conflate the task of controlling an avatar and directing the scene. The PAR system is Indigo Prophecy's implementation of what is known as "Quick Time Events." Quick Time Events have been around since *Dragon's Lair* (1983), returned in 1999 with *Shenmue* and gained popularity with *God of War* and *Resident Evil 4* (both released in early 2005). A Quick Time Event is a sequence in which the standard controls are deactivated and a sequence of button-pushes and/or motions (usually indicated on screen) entered accurately and quickly enough causes the avatar to perform a pre-determined maneuver, allowing for more elaborate actions. Outside of PAR, the avatar walks (or runs if X is held) in the direction of the left thumb-stick's tilt and the shoulder buttons adjust the camera. When a scene in *Indigo Prophecy* uses PAR, two colored circular sets of indicators appear onscreen (as in figure 4) and all other control is removed. When an indicator lights up, the player must correctly press the corresponding thumb-stick in that direction. Correct input will cause the avatar to dive out of a car's way, jump over a desk, swing from a rope, or even play the correct notes on a guitar. The player loses all control of the camera during these sequences so that a pre-determined "cinematic" sequence can ensue. These arrangements enable more impressively choreographed action sequences than are possible for traditional games where actions are finite and unchanged between encounters.


Figure #4: Lucas needs to escape from the policemen.

The PAR system represents conceptual innovation undermined by poor implementation. It is difficult to watch the interesting choreographed action while studying the indicators to learn what button sequence to push. Cage admitted that this mechanic was underdeveloped and came late in the process. The interface must be easy to read if the player is to follow the cinematic action. The failure of this implementation dramatizes the difficulty inherent in balancing interactivity with cinematic narrative effects. The experience is comparable to trying to watch a foreign language film with the subtitles in a very small almost illegible font. So much effort is put into following a single element of the scene that the rest is lost.

The mechanics of *Indigo Prophecy* join the task of guiding the characters and directing the narrative, rather than promoting “play” in the typical game sense. There are no skills developed over the course of the game. The stakes facing the characters rise as the game progresses,s but unlike most games the player does not experience this as

an increase in mechanical difficulty. Raph Koster explains “fun” as largely based around learning. He writes “as we succeed in mastering patterns thrown at us, the brain gives us little jolts of pleasure. But if the flow of new patterns slows, then we won’t get the jolts and we’ll start to feel boredom.”[7] *Indigo Prophecy*’s lack of new patterns provides little mechanical motivation to continue playing. Despite the higher narrative stakes later in the game, the interactions do not similarly ramp up in intensity. The player will not encounter challenges that require improved skills aside from faster PAR reactions. Due to this deficiency, the motivation to keep playing is supplied by the player’s interest in the story and characters. The most common criticism of *Indigo Prophecy* is that the final third (or so) of the game is significantly weaker than other portions. The murder mystery plot with supernatural overtones gives way to ancient apocalyptic cults, psychic powers, and even a malevolent artificial intelligence. As the plot’s coherence wanes, there is little to keep the player invested in the game. These failures contrast with the very promising early portions of the game.

The real focus of the game is the complex (though flawed) story. The player experiences the story through three characters that alternate as the avatar. There is immediate conflict between the avatars. The opening scene follows Lucas Kane, who commits a murder in a trance immediately before the player takes control. Then in the second scene, control switches to the two detectives trying to solve the murder (during scenes with multiple avatar-characters, control can be alternated at will). As the game progresses, the player alternates between Lucas on the run, and the detectives chasing

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[7] Raph Koster, “A Theory of Fun for Game Design”

him. The conflict that arises in the player, working against himself, could not exist in a movie. While viewers might identify with both the fugitive and the cops in a movie such as *The Fugitive*, they remain mere spectators. Forcing an individual player to act both sides is uniquely possible in the video game medium. One particularly striking sequence has the player as a cop attempting to construct a sketch of Lucas' face by choosing various facial features. This sequence has the player briefly acting as the witness rather than the cops. Identification with the characters is difficult as the player must decide whether to make an accurate representation to help the cops, or a bad representation to help Lucas. The minimal effect that the sketch's accuracy has on the story is a missed opportunity to test who the player identifies with.

According to Cage, the plot itself is "bendable". The player controls and is subject to the plot. Actions taken in one sequence will have minor ramifications with other characters and in later sequences. For instance, as Lucas the player can choose how to treat Lucas' ex-girlfriend Tiffany. It is possible to briefly rekindle the romance which results in a sex sequence (in the UK version only). Although this sequence might or might not occur, Lucas will always end up in the same place ready for the next major plot point. The player can even choose at certain points which character to play. Yet the overall plot is still fairly linear. The story merely "bends" in directions determined by the player.

Open-world games have become a major force in the industry. These games, exemplified by the Grand Theft Auto series (from GTA3 onwards), feature a large

persistent region where the player can explore and complete challenges at their own pace. This non-linear format is seen by many as a strength of the gaming medium. Yet *Indigo Prophecy* abandons this structure. Rather than having the whole city open to the characters, or even smaller regions beyond the current focus of the narrative, players are directed from one sequence to the next with little room for exploration. The player does not have to manually guide the characters to their next destination; travel occurs between scenes. As Cage says in the postmortem: "The last thing I wanted was to have the player wandering about for hours in sets that had actions every hundred meters." Non-linearity was understood to slow the narrative momentum. Instead, each scene could be designed never to deviate from story-relevant activities. This is at the expense of the freedom to live as one of the characters, which could have been interesting given the depth of mundane interactions with the environment described below.

These story-relevant activities are not necessarily what one might expect from a video game. The characters achieve depth through an emphasis on the mundane.Bryan Loyall argues "For immersion to take place, the characters in the world need to seem real to the participant."[8] There is no brave hero that spends every waking moment fighting evil. The characters in *Indigo Prophecy* have simple human needs. The player must complete such tasks as using the restroom, washing his or her hands, and getting dressed. These activities are used to make the characters "real," and therefore relatable.

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[8] Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game."

A memorable scene features one of the detectives, Tyler Miles, talking to his girlfriend before leaving for work. The conversation is about the girlfriend's fear that Tyler will be injured in the line of duty. It has little bearing on the overall plot, but sheds light on the character. In most games such a scene would permit minimal interaction. But *Indigo Prophecy* requires the player to choose Tyler's actions and reactions. While not advancing the story, the scene complicates and humanizes the character. An article in Gamasutra opinion article claims that the success of Film Noir depended "on flawed, unpredictable characters living out street-level conflicts between individuals in the mundane, modern-day urban world."[9] The scene with Tyler is just such a "street-level," "mundane" situation. Many games try to focus only on exciting and action-packed events. *Bioshock*, even with its nuanced story, is essentially a constant stream of combat only interrupted by brief puzzles. Role-playing games like Final Fantasy XII lacks action in many sequences, such as when exploring a city. Yet exploring the city is done for the explicit purpose of finding or buying new items to assist in combat, or find the encounter that will advance the plot. Controlling the characters in their normal lives, beyond the central murder mystery, builds a connection between the character and the player that is deeper than that of the typical player-avatar relationship.

*Indigo Prophecy* innovates in a variety of ways to decrease the space between game mechanics and the narrative. The inclusion of the player in the characters' mundane activities develops a more nuanced connection to the narrative. Contextual interactions add to the sense of the player being immersed in the game's world. The

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[9] Steve Gaynor, "Opinion: Is the Industry Ready for its 'Game Noir'?"

cinematic Quick Time Events have potential to free interactive sequences from rigid and repetitive mechanics. Some of the innovations are more successful than others, and the implementation was frequently weaker than the concept. Raph Koster wrote:

> "I see the possibility of creating games where the rules are informed by our understanding of human beings themselves. ... We know how to create games where the formal mechanics are about climbing a ladder of status. I don't know how to make a game that is about the loneliness of being at the top, but I think I can see how we might get there."[10]

*Indigo Prophecy*'s strength is in the development of mundane activities as character-illuminating mechanics. The next step would be to make the mundane activities more significant and nuanced so that games can express the subtle ideas suggested by Koster. Despite, and because of, its shortcomings, lessons can certainly be learned from *Indigo Prophecy* about the nature of narrative in an interactive medium.

[10] Raph Koster, "A Theory of Fun for Game Design"

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